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# Coalition sues Exxon for Plastic pollution

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A coalition of non-profit environmental organizations filed a lawsuit on Sept. 23 against ExxonMobil, the world's largest producer of single-use plastic polymers.

The coalition includes the Sierra Club, Surfrider Foundation, Heal the Bay, and San Francisco Baykeeper.

The complaint, filed in San Francisco County Superior Court, alleges violations of California nuisance law and California unfair competition law and alleges Exxon concealed the harms caused by plastics. The California Attorney General's Office filed a separate action addressing the same crises.

"As alleged in our complaint, Exxon profited by claiming plastics are safe and recyclable. But we know better now—our environment and health were being sacrificed just to protect Exxon's bottom line," said Allison Chin, President of the Sierra Club's Board of Directors. "Plastic Pollution has risen to be one of the defining environmental issues of our time. If we're going to clean up the mountains of plastic waste, Exxon needs to clean up its act."

The suit further alleges that Exxon systematically led the public to believe that plastic waste is easily and safely disposable via recycling, incineration or landfills, when in reality, plastic persists in the environment for thousands of years, leaking toxic chemicals that are known to harm human health and the environment. Exxon's conduct has exacerbated the environmental crises of plastic pollution and harmed California's coasts and waterways.

Even with recycling programs in place, in the U.S. less than 5% of our plastic is recycled into another plastic product, despite being labeled as "recyclable." Exxon-produced polymer resins are directly responsible for over 6 million metric tons of plastic waste annually — equivalent to the weight of 300,000 garbage trucks — which

end up contaminating our environment and our bodies, at every stage of its product lifecycle.

“For 40 years, the Surfrider Foundation has been fighting to protect our ocean, waves, and beaches. We’ve battled plastic pollution through beach cleanups, public education, and commonsense policy initiatives at the local, state, and federal levels. Despite these tireless efforts, 85% of items collected in our California beach cleanups in 2023 were still single-use plastics,” said Jennifer Savage of the Surfrider Foundation. “Now, for the health of our ocean and the people who depend on it, we’re taking this fight to court.”

NPR reported in 2020 that fossil fuel giants knew for decades that recycling wouldn’t solve the plastic waste environmental crisis or keep plastic out of landfills, according to internal industry documents. The Center for Climate Integrity also reported that Exxon spent millions of dollars on efforts to manipulate consumers’ perceptions of plastics recycling.

“California taxpayers shell out an estimated \$420 million each year to clean up and prevent plastic pollution from fouling our public places. Public money should be used for public good – not subsidizing big profits for Big Plastic,” said Tracy Quinn, president of Los Angeles-based nonprofit Heal the Bay.

Over 90% of U.S. consumers consider the amount of plastic in a product before deciding on a purchase. Exxon knew this fact — and exploited it.

“The complaint alleges that Exxon has brainwashed everyone into thinking that plastic recycling works and that it’s good for the planet. But when we pulled back the curtain, we found that Exxon’s plastic polymers are poisoning waterways, wildlife, and people,” said Sejal Choksi-Chugh of San Francisco Baykeeper. “San Francisco Bay has some of the highest levels of microplastics in the world,” he added.

Plastic pollution never biodegrades. Instead, it breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces — sometimes referred to as microplastics. Avoiding microplastics in our daily lives is virtually impossible. It is in our drinking water, the food we eat, and even in the air we breathe.

The average American inhales and ingests the equivalent of a credit card’s worth of microplastics each week, and microplastics have been found in human blood, heart and brain tissue, placentas, and even breast milk. This is well beyond consumer choice or individual responsibility — and there must be corporate accountability for a decades-long campaign to bury the truth about the known human health impacts caused by plastics.

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